




The Christchurch mosque shooting, the media, and subsequent gun control reform in New Zealand: a descriptive analysis

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In March 2019, a mass shooting at two Christchurch mosques, livestreamed to Facebook, resulted in the deaths of 51 people. Psychologically, this served as a focusing event with high threat salience, shocking a country unused to gun violence despite its comparatively lax firearm legislation. The unprecedented reluctance by the New Zealand media to feature the shooter as a protagonist or even publish his name, concentrating instead on victims and societal issues, helped promote a sense of collective responsibility for change. This was strongly modeled by political leaders. Within weeks, new gun control laws were introduced with bipartisan support. We present this as a national case study, considering psychological and societal enablers for legislative reform in response to extreme gun violence. The shooting also raised the intractable problem of the internet allowing terrorists to promulgate violent content and extremist ideology with regulation in this area harder to achieve than gun control.

Key words: gun control; gun violence; mass shooting; media terrorism.

Introduction

At 1.40 pm on Friday 15 March 2019 the call to prayer had finished at Al Noor Mosque in central Christchurch where approximately 500 people had gathered to worship. Unnoticed, a man in a gold Subaru had pulled up outside. Seated in the passenger seat beside him was a legally obtained arsenal of two semi-automatic weapons, two shotguns, a lever action firearm and ammunition. Minutes before, he had activated the live-streaming function on Facebook Live, and pressed ‘send’ on a prepared email addressed to a number of senior politicians and prominent media outlets. The man’s subsequent actions resulted in 101 casualties – 51 people killed and 50 more injured – and became the catalyst for a fundamental

shift in the New Zealand’s views about guns, safety and gun control.

Guns are common but gun violence has been rare in New Zealand

New Zealand is a country with a high number of guns, but comparatively low rates of gun violence. According to the Small Arms Survey (Karp, 2017), New Zealand has the 17th highest rate of civilian gun ownership in the world, with an estimated 1.2 million firearms distributed over a population of under 5 million people, or 26 firearms per 100 persons. This compares to 15 firearms per 100 people in Australia and more than 120 firearms per 100 people in the United States of America (Sydney School of Public Health, 2019).

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Although gun ownership in New Zealand has been increasing, with an estimated 62% rise in the number of guns in the country since 2008 (Sydney School of Public Health, 2019), gun violence itself is rare. For example, there has only ever been one fatal shooting at a school, and that took place almost 100 years ago, in 1923. The most recent available data show that the rate of gun deaths in New Zealand is approximately 1.2 deaths per 100,000 population per year: slightly higher than that in Australia at 1 death per 100,000 per year, and an order of magnitude lower than that in the United States at 11 deaths per 100,000 population per year (Sydney School of Public Health, 2019).

In the period between January 2004 and March 2019, 1068 people in New Zealand were the victims of homicide (Fyres & Ensor, 2019). Over this time, there have been 105 fatal gun attacks, leading to the deaths of 167 people (including 12 children), at an average of about 11 people per year. This compares to more than 10,000 gun-related homicides in the US every year (Sydney School of Public Health, 2019). In nearly all New Zealand cases, the perpetrator of gun homicide was male, and in 75% of cases the victim was also male. The Christchurch mosque shooting is the only mass shooting (defined as a multiple homicide incident in which four victims are murdered, within one event and in one or more locations in close geographical proximity; Krouse & Richardson, 2015) to occur in New Zealand during this 15-year period.

Family violence is a prominent contextual factor in gun homicide in New Zealand, with more than a third of events involving the killing of a family member, the majority with a female victim. Similarly, in the US, while 60% of victims of gun violence are male, half of female victims of gun homicide are killed by an intimate partner (United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). However, as in most countries, the leading cause of firearm-related death in New Zealand is not homicide, but

self-inflicted injury, which makes up more than 80% of gun related deaths (Sydney School of Public Health, 2019).

Firearms are used as the method in approximately 10% of all suicides in New Zealand. Prior to the 1992 Amendment to the Arms Act, which introduced more restrictive requirements for gun ownership, firearm suicides comprised approximately 18% of suicides in New Zealand (Beautrais, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2006).

Gun policy

Perhaps because of the relatively low rates of gun-related interpersonal violence, New Zealand has maintained a permissive stance on gun ownership compared with other jurisdictions. It is one of only three countries, including the United States and much of Canada, that had not (prior to events of 15 March 2019) mandated the registration of most firearms other than handguns (Stanglin, 2019). In 79 countries surveyed by the United Nations, firearm registration is ubiquitous. Among developed nations, New Zealand is an anomaly in not registering 96% of civilian firearms, with registration only required for certain classes of weapons.

There have been multiple attempts in the last 25 years to strengthen New Zealand gun control legislation. In 1996, a review of gun law was triggered in Australia after a mass shooting in Port Arthur, when a gunman shot 58 people, killing 35 of them. This led the Australian Government to introduce the National Firearms Agreement outlawing automatic and semi-automatic weapons, as well as pump-action shotguns (Chapman, Alpers, Agho, & Jones, 2006; Chapman, Stewart, Alpers, & Jones, 2018). Conscious of the resultant legislative reform occurring across the Tasman, the New Zealand government also commissioned a review. The resulting Thorp report (named after its author, retired High Court Judge, Sir Thomas Thorp) made 60 recommendations including: a ban on

military style semi-automatics; that all firearms be individually registered to their owners; tighter vetting; and that the licensing period be shortened from 10 to three years. Unlike Australia, none of these recommendations were enacted in New Zealand.

Similarly, an Arms Amendment Bill introduced in 2005 also failed to gain traction, and was taken off the agenda in 2012. Every year since 2010, government proposals for changes to legislation have been drawn up and have failed to progress. In 2017, a parliamentary select committee considering issues around illegal firearms offered 20 recommendations, of which two thirds were rejected.

This pattern of false starts suggests that while successive governments recognized that New Zealand gun law was out of step with that in most other countries, there was little driving public interest or political incentive to change the status quo. However, the 15 March 2019 event had such a profound effect on the country, that when three days later the Prime Minister announced emphatically, ‘Our gun laws will change’, (almost) no one disagreed (Fitzgerald, 2019).

Here we present a national case study, considering (a) the characteristics of the Mosque shooting event, (b) the impact and reporting of the shooting in the media, and (c) the preconceived views about gun ownership in New Zealand. We then examine the enablers for the legislative changes that continue to take place around gun reform.

The mosque shooting as a focusing event with high threat salience

We consider the mosque shooting to be a ‘focusing event’ for New Zealand. Social scientists define such events as extreme occurrences that can indelibly alter public opinion and change the political agenda (Birkland, 1998; Newman & Hartman, 2019). Examples of focusing events include the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the 9/11 attacks (Atkeson & Maestas, 2012; Birkland,

1998; Huddy & Feldman, 2006, 2011; Newman & Hartman, 2019; Smith, Rasinski, & Toce, 2001).

The mosque shooting was New Zealand’s first experience of terrorism – and it was profoundly shocking, involving the deaths of 51 men, women and children, many of them refugees, while praying in a place that should have been a sanctuary, filmed by the gunman and streamed in real time on Facebook. The scale of the event was almost unparalleled internationally – by comparison with mass shootings in the United States, the number of fatalities is exceeded only by the 58 deaths in the 2017 Las Vegas country music festival shooting. The authors of this paper all recall exactly what we were doing when we first heard news of the shooting, and we suspect that this is likely to be a universal experience for New Zealanders. The collective response was disbelief, horror, grief and shame, with many people also experiencing a palpable and exigent threat to their own sense of safety.

This high threat salience was reinforced when, in the immediate aftermath, authorities determined the attack to be an act of terrorism. Initially there were concerns that the terrorist might belong to a larger organized group, and this was followed by the fear of reprisals or copycat events. Jihadist groups around the world – including the Islamic State – threatened retaliation, and called on Muslims to take revenge. ‘The scenes of the massacres in the two mosques should wake up those who were fooled and should incite the supporters of the caliphate who live there to avenge their religion’, exhorted an Islamic State spokesperson on video clip (Callimachi, 2019).

The national terrorism threat level was raised to ‘high’ by New Zealand’s Security Intelligence Service for the first time in the country’s history. Public events across the country were cancelled, and guards were stationed outside mosques, churches, hospitals and public places nationwide. Police appeared in public carrying firearms (police are not usually armed in New Zealand). There were 118

media articles published in the months following the attack discussing the need for heightened security in New Zealand, based on the fear of either retaliatory or copycat attacks.

New Zealand is an island state, and smuggling weapons across its relatively secure borders is difficult, meaning the narrative quickly focused on whether other extremists with violent intent would be able to legally obtain firearms inside the country in order to perpetuate or avenge the violence.

The relative rarity of fatal shootings meant the average New Zealander had not previously dedicated much thought to gun control. Understandably, the mosque shooting and the fear it generated focused attention on the issue. An increase in threat salience in response to a mass public shooting has been associated with a significant increase in support for stricter gun control laws in US-based large-scale survey data (Newman & Hartman, 2019). This was clearly the case in New Zealand.

Media reporting in the three months following the mosque shootings

In order to understand the context in which the mosque shooting and subsequent law reform took place, we were interested in the media reporting around the mosque shooting, both as a barometer and as an influencer of public opinion.

We used the media database Factiva to search all print-based media reports from major New Zealand newspapers covering the mass shooting between the dates of 15 March 2019 and 15 June 2019 (inclusive), thus capturing the three months after the mosque shooting. Following the initial search, all identified articles were manually screened, and any ineligible articles were removed from the final sample. We removed duplications in which the same story was reprinted in more than one source. We identified 958 reports, spanning five major media outlets in New Zealand (the New Zealand Herald, the Dominion Post, the Otago Daily Times, the Sunday Star Times

and the Press). Of these reports, 749 had the mosque shootings as a central focus.

There were more articles on the mosque shooting than any other event in 2019, with the story dominating the headlines for three months. For comparison, searches for the terms ‘cricket world cup’ and ‘rugby world cup’ – representing two very popular sporting events that receive high media coverage in New Zealand – returned 182 and 200 discrete articles, respectively. We identified four prominent themes that we consider noteworthy.

Media Theme 1: a nameless and faceless gunman

One standout feature, which seems to differ from other international mass shootings, is the scarcity of print media about the shooter. A 28-year-old Australian, he had been active in alt-right chatrooms but he was not on any watch list, had no previous criminal or mental health history and had raised little suspicion amongst those who knew him. In only a small number of articles is he the subject. Many of these ($n=20$) focus on legal proceedings as the key story, while others discuss how he legally obtained the firearms used in the shootings ($n=6$). A handful ($n=4$) profiled his life in Dunedin, where he lived just prior to the shootings. Perhaps most noteworthy, the majority of media outlets in New Zealand elected not to name the gunman. Of the 749 reports that focused on the mosque shootings, only 53 (7.1%) mention the shooter’s name, and only twice did it appear in the headlines.

The reporting of seemingly scant information about the mosque shooter was not because his identity and background were unknown – he was apprehended within half an hour of the shooting, and was publicly identified the following day. Nor was it that he had not provided ample fodder for the media, having emailed his ‘manifesto’ to media outlets and planned, executed and filmed his attack incorporating staged and deliberately provocative elements. Rather, denying him the spotlight appears to have been an explicit moral choice,

with this deliberation sometimes discussed in the articles themselves (e.g. O'Donnell, 2019). The shooter's actions suggested a man seeking maximum exposure. The media, presumably repelled by the blatant solicitation of their attention, appears to have balked at providing him with what he sought. This was no doubt influenced by a strong message delivered by the New Zealand Prime Minister four days after the attack:

He is a terrorist. He is a criminal. He is an extremist. But he will, when I speak, be nameless. And to others, I implore you: speak the names of those who were lost rather than the name of the man who took them. He may have sought notoriety but we, in New Zealand, will give nothing – not even his name. (Jacinda Arden, 2019, para 42)

There was also strong resistance to enabling the promulgation of his extreme right ideologies. His 'manifesto' and footage of the event were deemed objectionable under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 (Classification Office, 2019). The New Zealand courts took this seriously, and a number of people were prosecuted for sharing this material (Radio New Zealand News, 2019). When the shooter appeared in court, photographs were allowed, but only if the shooter's features were pixelated on publication – and thus, within New Zealand at least, the shooter has to a greater extent remained both faceless and nameless. Notwithstanding a reluctance to profile the shooter himself, many articles ($n=111$) focused on the alt-right movement with which he identified and/or societal issues of racism, discrimination and inclusion.

The media's restraint in not sensationalizing the perpetrator and his views appears to deviate from the normal trajectory of media reporting in such events internationally and within New Zealand. For example, Murray (2017) analyzed media reports of mass shootings in America, and established 'Identification of Shooter' and 'Reports of

Character of Shooter' as the common third and fourth stages in the reporting cycle following a shooting (after 'Tragic Shock' and 'First Witness Reports'). In these stages, media 'scramble' to obtain and provide maximum coverage of the shooter's life, their personality and their ideology (Murray, 2017). Historically, the New Zealand media have also described the characters and motivations of mass shooters as dominant themes, with no reservations in naming them. As examples, the perpetrators of the 2011 Norwegian and 2017 Las Vegas shootings were identified and discussed in 85.6% (113/132) and 67.8% (40/59) of New Zealand print media describing these events in the 6 months following their occurrence.

Media Theme 2: focusing on the victims

In contrast to the limited coverage of the shooter, there were many stories featuring the victims, their families and community support ($n=534$). Many of these included eyewitness accounts of the attack and biographies of victims, organized events or memorials for victims, and efforts to support the mental, physical and financial wellbeing of survivors and/or their families. The majority involved an outpouring of sympathy and compassion for victims, survivors and their families. There was also a broader focus on the treatment of the Muslim community in New Zealand.

Media Theme 3: causal attribution – no agency to blame

After a catastrophic event like a mass shooting, sooner or later the commentary focuses on causal attribution (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2013). Specifically, who or what is to blame? Responsibility is laid on the heads of those considered to have failed in some way to have predicted, prevented or mitigated the harm. Criminal justice, law enforcement, intelligence and mental health agencies are typically blamed, alongside politicians.

In this case, maybe somewhat unusually, no agency was held up as a culprit to any significant degree. Reports about the first responders were generally positive. Most articles reporting on the police response praised them for acting rapidly, intercepting and apprehending the shooter on the way to a third target (e.g. Leask, 2019). Emergency services similarly arrived quickly on the scene, and transported those injured to hospital. The health system's capacity for treating victims was applauded (e.g. Lewis, 2019).

The government response was predominantly reported in a positive light, and there were no clear failings of any support services identified. Specifically, the Prime Minister was consistently praised for her leadership, in particular for her strong response to the perceived failings of social media platforms to take responsibility for the sharing of the shooter's livestream video.

Media Theme 4: gun control

Much of the narrative focused around how such a lethal arsenal of weapons could have been legally assembled. Some articles expressed concern or questioned how the gunman obtained the guns used in the shooting ($n = 15$). This included reports highlighting the lack of difficulty he had in passing police vetting procedures to obtain a gun license, and 'loopholes' that he may have used to maximize his arsenal. It was reported that, while the guns were obtained legally, their post-purchase modifications were illegal.

The ease at which the shooter legally obtained these guns seemingly acted as a catalyst for media discussions on gun law reform. The majority of articles within this theme ($n = 41$) reported arguments for changes in gun law (e.g. Devlin, 2019), including some individual gun owners (e.g. Meier, 2019). Included in this group of articles were reports on politicians and/or political parties that had changed their stance from opposing to supporting gun law reform as a result of the shootings,

including the Deputy Prime Minister, Winston Peters (e.g. Young, 2019).

No articles reported arguments against gun law reform *per se*, although concerns were raised around the process of enacting and enforcing the changes. For example, there was speculation that the proposed law changes were 'knee-jerk' reactions being made too quickly without careful consideration. This was emphasized by the ACT political party leader David Seymour, who was quoted as stating that his party opposed the 'rushed' legislation (Devlin, 2019). The first wave of gun law reform was passed in parliament within the first four weeks with 119 votes to one.

Media Theme 5: the role of social media

The role of social media was another area that came under scrutiny, featuring prominently in numerous articles ($n = 66$). First and foremost, social media was identified as a tool that allowed the suspect to quickly disseminate his beliefs and his actions on the day of the shooting. Some articles described how the shooter had essentially weaponized social media for this purpose (e.g. Christchurch mosque attacks – inside world of terrorism, 2019). As such, many articles highlighted the failures of social media platforms in effectively regulating their output (e.g. Keall, 2019). The vast majority of articles discussing social media focused specifically on Facebook ($n = 55$). Facebook came under particular fire in the New Zealand media for its role in acting too slowly or not having appropriate measures in place to prevent the mass sharing of the shooter's livestreamed video of the shootings. This subsequently led to a selection of New Zealand-based companies boycotting Facebook by removing all advertising from the platform (Edmunds, 2019).

Discussion of media themes

We hypothesize that the media narratives were one factor that helped influence and sustain

public support for gun control. While this theory is impossible to prove in this context, it is consistent with prior research. Media framing around gun control has been shown to affect policy attitudes (McGinty, Webster, & Barry, 2013; Newman & Hartman, 2019).

The New Zealand media's focus on the ease with which someone could legally obtain dangerous weapons and the environment in which terrorism can grow, rather than on the shooter himself, seems pertinent. It has been shown that the public is less likely to support policy efforts if they hold individuals – as opposed to societal factors – responsible for the issue the policy seeks to redress (Iyengar, 1991).

In an experimental study, messages about banning 'dangerous guns' with large-capacity magazines raised more support for such gun control than messages about preventing 'dangerous persons' from possessing guns (McGinty et al., 2013). Similarly, survey research has found that opposition toward the ability to carry a concealed weapon increased when the issue of carrying handguns was framed as a potential threat to public safety (compared to as a matter of constitutional rights; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001).

Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that the media's refusal to be complicit in immortalizing the shooter may reduce the risk of contagion (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). To date, there have been no further shootings.

Political will

At the time of the shooting New Zealand was governed by a left-leaning coalition government. It might be speculated that was a political factor, which enabled legislative change to take place.

In the US, a recent National Bureau of Economic Research (Luca, Malhotra, & Poliquin, 2019) analysis of the impact of mass shootings on gun policy considered the influence of political parties. This concluded that

mass shootings are associated with increased introduction of Bills (compounded by media coverage), but that whether these are enacted depends on the ruling party. In Republican states, mass shootings typically lead to a loosening of gun restrictions, but when Democrats are in power, no significant legal changes typically ensue.

In New Zealand the previously described period of failed attempts to change gun laws (1996–2018) has included periods of both liberal (Labour) and conservative (National) party governments (or coalition governments led by one of those parties). The only previous incident of a mass shooting that led to any change in gun control law in New Zealand occurred in 1990, when a 33-year-old man killed 13 people and injured another three using two military-style semi-automatic weapons before he was shot dead by police (Cantor, Mullen, & Alpers, 2000). This was the worst mass shooting in the country prior to the Christchurch mosque attack. The subsequent passing of the Arms Amendment Act 1992 resulted in restrictions to ammunition sales and importing of semi-automatic weapons; requirement of license endorsement for semi-automatic weapons; owners having to keep their guns in locked storage; and firearms licenses having a 10-year limit before reapplication was required (Buchanan, 2013).

That the 1992 Amendment was passed when a right-leaning National government was in power, while the most recent (2019) amendment was passed by a Labour government (with almost unanimous cross-party support), further suggests that a bipartisan political will in New Zealand is generated by 'focusing events' such as a mass shooting. This could reflect New Zealanders holding broadly similar attitudes towards gun ownership (see below) in a way that has not been observed in other countries including the US.

However, the leadership skills of the incumbent Prime Minister in achieving consensus change and public support also warrant acknowledgement. From the outset, she

fronted the media, modeling a compassion and determination for which she was applauded both in New Zealand and internationally. Her approval ratings reached an all-time high three weeks after the shooting (Rahim, 2019).

Views on gun ownership

New Zealand has a post-colonial agricultural tradition, and guns are most commonly used for farming, pest control and hunting. In New Zealand the police force does not routinely carry firearms (New Zealand Police, 2007), nor is self-defense a legitimate reason to own a gun. Despite the high rates of gun ownership, firearms are viewed as a tool or a hobby in New Zealand, not as an entitlement – for example, there is no right to bear arms embedded in any constitution, nor the national psyche. New Zealand’s gun lobby does not hold the same level of power and political capital that it does in the United States.

Subsequent enacted and proposed changes to gun legislation

The factors identified – the scale of the attack, the media focus on the legal origins of the weapons and the fear of further violence – all meant there was strong support for change in gun law combined with a sense of urgency. Within a week of the attack, the Government announced a ban on military style semi-automatic weapons, with legislation to restrict semi-automatic firearms and magazines with greater than 10 rounds passed in parliament with 119 votes out of a possible 120.

This rapid action is likely to have coincided with a window of maximum support for legislative change. Opinion polls in the United States reveal peaks in public support for gun control that appeared to coincide with the mass shootings in Columbine (Smith, 2002) and Newtown (Wozniak, 2017), though such peaks quickly regressed to baseline over time (Newman & Hartman, 2019).

The New Zealand Government pledged \$168 million for a mandatory buy-back

scheme to compensate owners of the now banned weapons, while acknowledging that cost estimates were uncertain, due to the normal Regulatory Impact Assessment process (which typically rigorously assesses costs of any new legislation) having been circumvented by the rapid progression of the Bill. As of 14 November 2019, 32,000 firearms had been collected, of which 21,000 were military style semi-automatic rifles (Manch, 2019).

The police have enabled a new system, Gun Safe, to record when officers encounter firearms. Preliminary data from this system show that police responded to 629 incidents involving firearms from March to June 2019, and seized 693 firearms over these three months (Manch, 2019).

Further legislative change is in train. A new bill, which passed its second reading in February 2020, provides for a registry to monitor and track every firearm legally held in New Zealand. It also tightens rules on licensing and will mean individuals have to renew their license every five years instead of every 10. People will be disqualified from holding a gun license if they have serious violence, drugs or firearms convictions in the past 10 years or have a protection order against them. The Bill also includes provisions to enable health practitioners to notify police if they have concerns about a license owner’s health or wellbeing.

The changes in gun legislation have not been without their detractors. Shortly after the mosque shooting, a video appeared on the US-based National Rifle Association’s (NRA) website accusing gun control advocates in New Zealand of trying to ‘politicize’ the mosque shootings. The post invited supporters ‘to stop their [New Zealand’s] social disarmament’ and invited them to ‘donate now’ (Pullar-Strecker, 2019, para 4). However, this garnered little support in New Zealand, with the former police minister of the right-leaning opposition party, Judith Collins, famously retorting that the NRA could ‘bugger off’ (O’Malley, 2019).

In July 2019, a group of firearms advocates calling themselves the Kiwi Party legally challenged the validity of the Arms Amendment Act and the expedited process by which it was passed in the High Court. They also requested the court to prevent the Government from enacting the law until six months after the 2020 election, or until a referendum could be held. This was dismissed by the High Court. While changes are ongoing, it appears New Zealand has been able to enact rapid legislative reform where previous attempts over 25 years had failed.

Violence on the internet and the Christchurch call

There is another new and evolving risk exemplified by the Christchurch attack that is not well understood but that comprises an important target for research and intervention. This is the role of the livestreaming function on social media in promoting and promulgating violence. The shooter carefully stage-managed his attack. He scripted references to previous shooters (e.g. the perpetrator of the 2011 Norwegian shooting), YouTube stars, memes and far-right symbols as ‘hooks’ for attracting attention and communicating with an international audience. And then he filmed and streamed the murders at Al Noor mosque in real time.

The footage was discussed as it emerged on the web-based message board 8chan, an anonymous forum known for its vitriolic and extremist commentary. Users were urged to use strategies to preserve the content before it was ‘censored’. While moderators raced to take down original content, the video metastasized and proliferated with the content being moved back and forth across social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Reddit faster than the sites could keep up with. The video spread particularly widely on YouTube with some titles named after quotes from the shooter, such as, ‘Let’s get this party started’. Facebook said it removed 1.5 million copies of the video. The attack has remained available

on the internet despite the measures taken to remove it.

The accessibility of video of the mass shooting is deeply worrying. First, by filming his attack, the gunman extended the various impacts of the violence beyond those directly affected. With Christchurch city in lockdown during the attack, children reportedly watched people being shot on their devices from the floors of their classrooms and relatives of potential victims desperately scanned footage searching for evidence of family members.

Secondly, the gunman was able to exploit social media as an attempt to gain notoriety and influence others. There is evidence that mass shootings can lead to contagion (Towers et al., 2015). In an ethnographic content analysis of the correspondence of perpetrators of mass shootings, Murray (2017) found that the shooters were influenced by and frequently referenced the autobiographical details of prior killers as role models, concluding that ‘They do not just copycat prior killers, they often relate to them, are inspired by them, and want to outdo them . . . [the reporting] provides the inspiration and fuel for later killings’ (Murray, 2017, p. 114).

Two months after the mosque shootings, on 15 May 2019, the New Zealand Prime Minister and French President brought together Heads of State and Government and leaders from technology sectors in support of the ‘Christchurch Call’ (see New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *n.d.*). This is a commitment by Governments and tech companies to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online. The initiative has been supported by 53 countries and eight large online media companies, although the United States is a notable non-signatory. It remains to be seen what, if any, long-term reform will come out of this initiative.

Conclusion

Changing gun legislation can be a notoriously vexed process. The legislative reform currently

taking place in New Zealand seems to have been unusually non-contentious. Prior to March 2019, gun control in New Zealand was permissive by international standards, with the background rates of gun-related suicide and homicide seemingly below the threshold required to bring the issue to the forefront of public and political consciousness. The mosque shooting served as a focusing event eliciting strong feelings of shock, sadness and high threat salience across the country. Media restraint in not sensationalizing the shooter, and instead focusing on wider systemic issues, may have contributed to providing public mandate for legislative change.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Susanna Every-Palmer has declared no conflicts of interest

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Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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